

"IHS – What Does It Mean"

A Sermon

preached by the

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"IHS — WHAT DOES IT MEAN?"

*"Him hath God exalted with his right hand
to be a Prince and a Saviour."* — Acts 5:31.

I. Man Needs a Saviour.

Here is the authentic note of the Christian faith. Peter and the apostles did not announce what they were going to do to vindicate Jesus and perpetuate His name. They announced what God had done in Christ to create a new relationship between man and God, and so redeem the world. "The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom ye slew and hanged on a tree" (5:31). It was the God of their fathers who did that, the God in whom the detractors and opponents of Christ themselves believed. In New Testament times people believed in God generally. The difficulty was to get them to believe in Jesus — that He was in any unique way the fuller self-revelation of the God of their fathers. In modern times the problem is reversed. People believe in Jesus generally — the great man, the religious genius, the prophet and teacher, the giver of the Sermon on the Mount. It is more difficult to get them to believe that in a unique way God comes to us in Christ as Saviour. Plenty of people are ready to call Him "Prince", or "Leader", as the Revised Standard Version of 1946 translates the Greek word. Not so many are prepared to acknowledge Christ as Saviour.

Man needs a Saviour. When things are going well with us, or with the world, it is like human nature to be too complacent and self-satisfied to own up to it. We're content to call Him "Prince", or "Leader". When things go ill with us, and with the world, we know that it is true. Man calls out for a Saviour. Furthermore, when mankind, or any large portion of Christendom, is not prepared to worship in the name of Christ the Saviour of men, they will invent substitute saviours of their own choosing. The pseudo-saviours of the first half of the twentieth century, the false Messiahs and supplanters of Christ arose because men thought that they could get along without a Saviour. So we had Hitler, Mussolini and Lenin in nations that had already been taught to reverence Christ; and Hirohito in a nation that had not come to know Him. When we refuse or fail to acknowledge the God who created us in His image, we will create false gods made in our own image. In the light of this — and of the man-made Messiahs and divinities of this last half century — will anyone now boast that he is too educated, cultured and advanced to give to Jesus the title of Redeemer, and to join his voice to the multitude who place their hope and the hope of the world in IHS?

II. IHS.

What does it mean — this inscription that you see carved upon pulpits and communion tables, embroidered on altar cloths, and worked into the patterns of stained glass windows? Perhaps it is a measure of the religious literacy of our time that more people are familiar with what UNO means, or UNRRA, ERP and ECA, than know the meaning of IHS. Different explanations have been given in different periods of Christian history.

1. **"In His Steps"**. This is modern — characteristic of 20th century America. Jesus is our Leader, our moral example. We are to follow His code, "In His steps". Call Him Prince. True — but the original meaning conveyed infinitely more than that.

2. **"In Hoc Signo"** — "In This Sign". Tradition traces this interpretation back to the 4th Century A.D., to the legend that before the battle that made him Emperor, Constantine saw a vision of a banner in the sky bearing the Cross, and heard a message, "In Hoc signo vinces" — "By this sign conquer". After victory in that battle, Constantine, now Emperor, proclaimed Christianity, so long persecuted and suppressed, to be the official religion of the Roman Empire. Well, in any case, this meaning carried the authentic note of the Christian faith — "In this Sign", that is, in the Saviour's Cross.

3. **"In Hoc Salus"**. Another Latin meaning is similar — "In hac salus" — "In this (Cross) is salvation" — again the authentic note of the Christian faith.

4. **"Jesus Hominum Salvator"**. The same meaning is conveyed in another interpretation which comes from medieval Latin Christianity — "Jesus hominum salvator" — "Jesus the Saviour of mankind".

5. **IHS(OUS)**. This is the original meaning. The I is the Greek capital I or J. The H is the Greek capital E and the S is the Greek capital S. Together they are the first three letters of the Greek word IHESOUS, which means "Jesus.". So IHS is one of the earliest symbols of the Saviour.

It is not the twentieth century explanation, "In His Steps", but the earlier explanations of the symbol which set forth the true nature and significance of Jesus, and strike the authentic note of the Christian faith. "Him hath God exalted . . . to be a Prince and a Saviour".

III. Creative Ages are Ages of Faith.

In ages of faith and creative spiritual power, the hesitance to call Jesus the Saviour of men disappears. These are the ages when Christians are most eager to acknowledge Jesus to be, not merely Prince or Leader, but the Divine Saviour of men. In great eras of faith Christians ascribe moral power, not primarily to human effort and genius, but to God, who is both Judge and Redeemer. In a sweeping view of Christian history one can distinguish four such cycles of creative faith.

1. The First Century A.D. This is the New Testament period. It saw the collapse of the Jewish nation, and of the Jewish religion and culture in Palestine. Counteracting this came the new faith in Jesus the Saviour of mankind. The first Christian era began with the conviction that man is utterly dependent on God, the Divine Power, for forgiveness, personal redemption and the redemption of the world. "Him hath God exalted to be a Prince and a Saviour", cried Peter. "By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God", wrote Paul. By the time that Christianity had won political and social security by being made the official religion of the Roman Empire, the belief was growing in the Church that men can earn and win their own salvation through reliance upon human effort and genius. The view that Jesus was something less than the actual self-revelation of God was also coming to the fore. A prominent school of Christian thought held that He was simply a man who by his own human efforts lived such a good life that He earned the right to be called divine. There was a long struggle in the Church against the tendency of sincere Christians to be content to call Jesus Prince, or Leader, of men, without calling Him Saviour.

2. The Fall of Rome. Then came the collapse of the Roman civilization in the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. Then came also Augustine with his re-assertion of the doctrine of irresistible grace — that the God revealed in Jesus can do anything with and for man, that man can do nothing to save himself, and that only God, made known in Christ, can save him. It was a return to the authentic note of the Christian faith. It guided and inspired Christian thought for centuries. But Augustine's great teaching of the power of Divine Grace became watered down through the Middle Ages, as the medieval culture gave Christianity security in the secular world. It ended in scholasticism, and a corrupt Roman Church ruled by man's pride in his own power to perpetuate the Church and Christian civilization as human institutions. A morally powerless Church, and a morally rotten age whose ruling idea was man's dependence on himself, preceded and accompanied the Renaissance.

3. The Protestant Reformation. Again the authentic note was struck by Martin Luther in his doctrine of justification by faith in Christ alone, and by Calvin with his emphasis on the absolute sovereignty of God. This re-emphasis of Christian essentials vitalized and guided a new era. Two centuries later man's complacent trust in a seemingly stable society had reduced the religion of Divine Grace to the limits of eighteenth century Deism — a cultured rationalism which exalted human reason to the supreme place, and instilled a confident trust in man's power to solve all his problems. The religion of Jesus the Saviour of mankind was played down or ignored.

4. The Evangelical Revival. In a century which ended in violent revolutions there came John Wesley, who on the 24th of May, 1738, in a little Moravian chapel in Aldersgate Street in London, at about a

quarter to nine in the evening, felt his heart strangely warmed, and knew that he did trust in Christ, and Christ alone, for salvation. Again the authentic note of the Christian faith was sounded. The transforming influence of that Evangelical Revival has lasted till the present century. Again we have seen an era of humanism, of man's fatal confidence in himself, come to the fore at the beginning of the twentieth century. Two terrible wars and the collapse of rosy dreams of unlimited human progress have produced signs that the Church is again on the threshold of a new era of faith. There is a return to glad and unashamed acknowledgment of Christ who is more than teacher and example, prophet and leader — the Divine Saviour of men. Here again is the authentic note of the Christian faith.

IV. The Reasonableness of Faith in the Saviour.

There is nothing arbitrary or artificial about accepting Christ as Saviour.

Once in Vancouver I was coming up Granville St. in an empty street car. Being near the front, I got up and stood beside the motorman to get off at 33rd Ave. He did not see me until he had passed the intersection, and had to bring the car to a sudden stop. He could have opened the front door and let me off in ten seconds. It would have interfered with nobody, and he would have been quickly on his way. Instead he snapped, "Go down to the back of the car, and get off at the rear door". In view of my Highland ancestry, I take it as a sign of grace that I obeyed so meekly. But I could have got out that front door! And a reasonable man would have let me do it. To serve his own stubborn pride and to assert his little measure of authority, that motorman limited my exit to one arbitrarily chosen way.

It is sad, and so mistaken, but some people think that God is like that. They think it mere arbitrariness to insist that we accept Christ as Saviour, when, as they think, the world could just as well be saved in half a dozen other ways. They feel that a God of love should be willing to admit to heaven those who acknowledge Jesus to be Prince of men, though they are unable or unwilling to confess Him as Lord and Saviour, and yet, they think, God, or at least the Church in the name of God, puts His moral policemen on these other possible roads to salvation, to turn us back, saying: You could get to heaven by the road of reason, but God insists that it must be by blind faith; you could get to heaven by a life of service, but God insists that it must be by accepting His forgiving love in the sacrifice of Christ; you could achieve a heavenly state by developing your personality, and by exerting our purely human capacities for social and political reform, but you've got to go back and take the only road that God has allowed to be open, and accept Christ as Saviour. It seems so arbitrary, so artificial and so narrow.

Well, if we can get to heaven, and achieve the salvation of our common life on earth simply by the road of reason, or by the road of deeds of service, or by any combination of the moral resources of unaided human nature — God will not say, well, you've got here, but I won't let you in. He will say, "Well done, good and faithful servant, thrice welcome!" But why haven't we done it? Why aren't we doing it? And who has done it? What if there is no other road? What if, somewhere along the only road that is open, we're bound to meet God bearing Christ's Cross for us? What if we're bound, sooner or later, to realize in our own experience, that the only way through is the way He makes for us, when we cannot make a way for ourselves? What if the only honest thing to do is to close with the Love that will not let us go, and acknowledge that we owe it to Him that such a road exists at all, and call Him both Prince and Saviour?

V. Jesus Saves.

If Christ confronts us with a quality of personal character which makes us, when we differ from it, feel rebuked, ashamed, and repentant for the difference, yet compelled to return to Him, then Jesus saves personally.

If Christ presents to our world a vision of human society that impels those who see it to set themselves against every condition that exploits, dwarfs and corrupts the spirit of man, in the deep conviction that God wills an infinitely better life for us all, then Jesus saves from social damnation.

If Christ imparts a trust and confidence in the love of God that stands the test of every doubt, disaster and betrayal, even in ourselves, then Jesus saves from moral despair.

If Christ lives eternally, and leads those who trust Him into an eternal relationship with God, then Jesus saves eternally.

A world where man-made Messiahs have so easily usurped the place of God, where man-made systems stifle from their own self-centredness and moral impotence, where self-made men are pretty humble and shaky about their power to cope with the disasters that threaten — is a world that needs a Saviour. IHS — Jesus the Saviour of mankind: that is the authentic note on which the Church was founded, the authentic note of every creative age of faith, the authentic note of the Gospel for our time.

It is when our generation recognizes that God has given to the world Jesus, the Saviour of men, that we will be able to travel "in His steps".

